A-T[orrey]
Widow
1891

Torrey, B. Widow and Wins (1891)

HARVARD UNIVERSITY.

LIBRARY

OF THE

MUSEUM OF COMPARATIVE ZOÖLOGY

58,504

BEQUEST OF

WALTER FAXON

January 21, 1922.

JAN 21 1922

58.504.

A WIDOW AND TWINS.

"The fatherless and the widow . . . shall eat and be satisfied." — DEUTERONOMY xiv. 29.

ON the 1st of June, 1890, I formally broke away from ornithological pursuits. For two months, more or less, — till the autumnal migration should set in, — I was determined to have my thoughts upon other matters. There is no more desirable plaything than an outdoor hobby, but a man ought not to be forever in the saddle. Such, at all events, had always been my opinion, so that I long ago promised myself never to become, what some of my acquaintances, perhaps with too much reason, were now beginning to consider me, a naturalist, and nothing else. That would be letting the hobbyhorse run away with its owner. For the time being, then, birds should pass unnoticed, or be looked at only when they came in my way. A sensible resolve. But the maker of it was neither Mede nor Persian, as the reader, if he have patience enough, may presently discover for himself.

As I sat upon the piazza, in the heat of the day, busy or half busy with a book, a sound of humming-bird's wings now and then fell on my ear, and, as I looked toward the honeysuckle vine, I began after a while to remark that the visitor was invariably a female. I watched her probe the scarlet tubes and dart away, and then returned to my page. She might have a nest somewhere near; but if she had there was small likelihood of my finding it, and, besides, I was just now not concerned with such trifles. On the 24th of June, however, a passing neighbor dropped into the yard. Was I interested in humming-birds? he inquired. If so, he could show me a nest. I put down my book, and went with him at once.

The beautiful structure, a model of artistic workmanship, was near the end of one of the lower branches of an apple-tree, eight or ten feet from the ground, saddled upon the drooping limb at a point where two offshoots made a good holding-place, while an upright twig spread over it a leafy canopy against rain and sun. Had the builders sought my advice as to a location, I could hardly have suggested one better suited to my own convenience. The tree was within a stone's toss of my window, and, better still, the nest was overlooked to excellent advantage from an old bank wall which divided my premises from those of my next-door neighbor. How could I doubt that Providence itself had set me a summer lesson?

At our first visit the discoverer of the nest — from that moment an ornithologist — brought out a step-ladder, and we looked in upon the two tiny white eggs, considerately improving a temporary absence of the owner for that purpose. It was a picture to please not only the eye, but the imagination; and before I could withdraw my gaze the mother bird was back again, whisking about my head so fearlessly that for a moment I stood still, half expecting her to drop into the nest within reach of my hand.

This, as I have said, was on the 24th of June. Six days later, on the afternoon of the 30th, the eggs were found to be hatched, and two lifeless-looking things lay in the bottom of the nest, their heads tucked out of sight, and their bodies almost or quite naked, except for a line of grayish down along the middle of the back.

Meanwhile, I had been returning with interest the visits of the bird to our honeysuckle, and by this time had fairly worn a path to a certain point in the wall, where, comfortably seated in the

shade of the hummer's own tree, and armed with opera-glass and notebook, I spent some hours daily in playing the spy upon her motherly doings.

For a widow with a house and family upon her hands, she took life easily; at frequent intervals she absented herself altogether, and even when at home she spent no small share of the time in flitting about among the branches of the tree. On such occasions, I often saw her hover against the bole or a patch of leaves, or before a piece of caterpillar or spider web, making quick thrusts with her bill, evidently after bits of something to eat. On quitting the nest, she commonly perched upon one or another of a certain set of dead twigs in different parts of the tree, and at once shook out her feathers and spread her tail, displaying its handsome white markings, indicative of her sex. This was the beginning of a leisurely toilet operation, in the course of which she scratched herself with her feet and dressed her feathers with her bill, all the while darting out her long tongue with lightning-like rapidity, as if to moisten her beak, which at other times she cleansed by rubbing it down with her claws or by wiping it upon a twig. In general she paid little attention to me, though she sometimes hovered directly in front of my face, as if trying to stare me out of countenance. One of the most pleasing features of the show was her method of flying into the nest. She approached it, without exception, from the same quarter, and, after an almost imperceptible hovering motion, shut her wings and dropped upon the eggs.

When the young were hatched I redoubled my attentions. Now I should see her feed them. On the first afternoon I waited a long time for this purpose, the mother conducting herself in her customary manner: now here, now there, preening her plumage, driving away a meddlesome sparrow, probing the florets of a convenient clover-head (an unusual resource, I think), or snatching a morsel from some leaf or twig. Suddenly she flew at me, and held herself at a distance of perhaps four feet from my nose. Then she wheeled, and, as I thought, darted out of the orchard. In a few seconds I turned my head, and there she sat in the nest! I owned myself beaten. While I had been gazing toward the meadow, she had probably done exactly what I had wasted the better part of the afternoon in attempting to see.

Twenty-four hours later I was more successful, though the same ruse was again tried upon me. The mother left the nest at my approach, but in three minutes (by the watch) flew in again. She brooded for nine minutes. Then, quite of her own motion, she disappeared for six minutes. On her return she spent four minutes in dressing her feathers, after which she alighted on the edge of the nest, fed the little ones, and took her place upon them. This time she brooded for ten minutes. Then she was away for six minutes, dallied about the tree for two minutes longer, and again flew into the nest. While sitting, she pecked several times in quick succession at a twig within reach, and I could plainly see her mandibles in motion, as if she were swallowing. She brooded for thirteen minutes, absented herself for three minutes, and spent six minutes in her usual cautionary manœuvres before resuming her seat. For the long interval of twenty-two minutes she sat still. Then she vanished for four minutes, and on her return gave the young another luncheon, after a fast of one hour and six minutes.

The feeding process, which I had been so desirous to see, was of a sort to make the spectator shiver. The mother, standing on the edge of the nest, with her tail braced against its side, like a woodpecker or a creeper, took a rigidly erect position, and craned her neck until her bill was in a perpendicular line

above the short, wide-open, upraised beak of the little one, who, it must be remembered, was at this time hardly bigger than a humblebee. Then she thrust her bill for its full length down into his throat, a frightful-looking act, followed by a series of murderous gesticulations which fairly made one observer's blood run cold.

On the day after this (on the 2d of July, that is to say) I climbed into the tree, in the old bird's absence, and stationed myself where my eyes were perhaps fifteen feet from the nest, and a foot or two above its level. At the end of about twenty minutes, the mother, who meantime had made two visits to the tree, flew into place, and brooded for seventeen minutes. Then she disappeared again, and on her return, after numberless pretty feints and sidelong approaches, alighted on the wall of the nest, and fed both little ones. The operation, though still sufficiently reckless, looked less like infanticide than before, — a fact due, as I suppose, to my more elevated position, from which the nestlings' throats were better seen. After this she brooded for another seventeen minutes. On the present occasion, as well as on many others, it was noticeable that, while sitting upon the young, she kept up an almost incessant motion, as if seeking to warm them, or perhaps to develop their muscles by a kind of massage treatment. A measure of such hitchings and fidgetings might have meant nothing more than an attempt to secure for herself a comfortable seat; but when they were persisted in for fifteen minutes together, it was difficult not to believe that she had some different end in view. Possibly, as human infants get exercise by dandling on the mother's knee, the baby hummingbird gets his by this parental kneading process. Whether brooding or feeding, it must be said that the hummer treated her tiny charges with no particular carefulness, so far as an outsider could judge.

The next day I climbed again into the tree. The mother bird made off at once, and did not resume her seat for almost an hour, though she would undoubtedly have done so earlier but for my presence. Again and again she perched near me, her bill leveled straight at my face. Finally she alighted on the nest, and, after considerable further delay, as if to assure herself that everything was quite safe, fed the two chicks from her throat, as before. "She thrust her bill into their mouths so far" (I quote my notes) "that the tips of their short little beaks were up against the root of her mandibles!"

Only once more, on the 4th of July, I ventured into the apple-tree. For more than an hour and a half I waited. Times without number the mother came buzzing into the tree, made the circuit of her favorite perches, dressed her plumage, darted away again, and again returned, till I was almost driven to get down, for her relief. At last she fed the nestlings, who by this time must have been all but starved, as indeed they seemed to be. "The tips of their bills *do* come clean up to the base of the mother's mandibles." So I wrote in my journal; for it is the first duty of a naturalist to verify his own observations.

On the 10th we again brought out the ladder. Though at least eleven days old, the tiny birds — the "widow's mites," as my facetious neighbor called them — were still far from filling the cup. While I stood over it, one of them uttered some pathetic little cries that really went to my heart. His bill, perceptibly longer than on the 5th, was sticking just above the border of the nest. I touched it at the tip, but he did not stir. Craning my neck, I could see his open eye. Poor, helpless things! Yet within three months they would be flying to Central America, or some more distant clime. How little they knew what was before them! As little as I know what is before me.

The violence of the feeding act was

now at its height, I think, but it would be impossible to do justice to it by any description. My neighbor, who one day stood beside me looking on, was moved to loud laughter. When the two beaks were tightly joined, and while the old bird's was being gradually withdrawn, they were shaken convulsively, — by the mother's attempts to disgorge, and perhaps by the young fellow's efforts to hasten the operation. It was plain that he let go with reluctance, as a boy sucks the very tip of the spoon to get the last drop of jam; but, as will be mentioned in the course of the narrative, his behavior improved greatly in this respect as he grew older.

On the 12th, just after the little ones had been fed, one of them got his wings for the first time above the wall of the nest, and fluttered them with much spirit. He had spent almost a fortnight in the cradle, and was beginning to think he had been a baby long enough.

From the first I had kept in mind the question whether the feeding of the young by regurgitation, as described briefly by Audubon, and more in detail by Mr. William Brewster,[1] would be continued after the nestlings were fully grown. On the 14th I wrote in my journal: "The method of feeding remains unchanged, and, as it seems, is likely to remain so to the end. It must save the mother much labor in going and coming, and perhaps renders the cooperation of the male parent unnecessary." This prediction was fulfilled, but with a qualification to be hereafter specified.

Every morning, now, I went to the apple-tree uncertain whether the nest would not be found empty. According to Audubon, Nuttall, Mr. Burroughs, and Mrs. Treat, young humming-birds stay in the nest only seven days. Mr. Brewster, in his notes already cited, says that the birds on which his observations were made — in the garden of Mr. E. S. Hoar, in Concord — were hatched on the 4th of July,[2] and forsook the nest on the 18th. My birds were already fifteen days old, at least, and, unless they were to prove uncommonly backward specimens, ought to be on the wing forthwith. Nevertheless they were in no haste. Day after day passed. The youngsters looked more and more like old birds, and the mother grew constantly more and more nervous.

On the 18th I found her in a state of unprecedented excitement, squeaking almost incessantly. At first I attributed this to concern at my presence, but after a while it transpired that a young oriole — a blundering, tailless fellow — was the cause of the disturbance. By some accident he had dropped into the leafy treetop, as guiltless of any evil design as one of her own nestlings. How she did buzz about him! In and out among the branches she went, now on this side of him, now on that, and now just over his back; all the time squeaking fiercely, and carrying her tail spread to its utmost. The scene lasted for some minutes. Through it all the two young birds kept perfectly quiet, never once putting up their heads, even when the mother, buzzing and calling, zigzagged directly about the nest. I had seen many birds in the tree, first and last, but none that created anything like such a stir. The mother was literally in a frenzy. She went the round of her perches, but could stay nowhere. Once she dashed out of the tree for an instant, and drove a sparrow away from the tomato patch. Ordinarily his presence there would not have annoyed her in the least, but in her then state of mind she was ready to pounce upon any-

[1] The Auk, vol. vii. p. 206.

[2] But Mr. Hoar, from whom Mr. Brewster had his dates, informs me that the time of hatching was not certainly known; and from Mr. Brewster's statement about the size of the nestlings, I cannot doubt that they had been out of the shell some days longer than Mr. Hoar then supposed.

body. All of which shows once more how "human-like" birds are. The bewilderment of the oriole was comical. "What on earth can this crazy thing be shooting about my ears in this style for?" I imagined him saying to himself. In fact, as he glanced my way, now and then, with his innocent baby face, I could almost believe that he was appealing to me with some such inquiry.

The next morning ("at 7.32," as my diary is careful to note) one of the twins took his flight. I was standing on the wall, with my glass leveled upon the nest, when I saw him exercising his wings. The action was little more pronounced than had been noticed at intervals during the last three or four days, except that he was more decidedly on his feet. Suddenly, without making use of the rim of the nest, as I should have expected him to do, he was in the air, hovering in the prettiest fashion, and in a moment more had alighted on a leafless twig slightly above the level of the nest, and perhaps a yard from it. Within a minute the mother appeared, buzzing and calling, with answering calls from the youthful adventurer. At once — after a hasty reconnaissance of the man on the wall — she perched beside him, and plunged her bill into his throat. Then she went to the nest, served the other one in the same way, and made off. She had no time to waste at this juncture of affairs.

When she had gone, I stepped up to the trunk of the tree to watch the little fellow more closely. He held his perch, and occupied himself with dressing his plumage, though, as the breeze freshened, he was compelled once in a while to keep his wings in motion to prevent the wind from carrying him away. When the old bird returned, — in just half an hour, — she resented my intrusion (what an oppressor of the widow and the fatherless she must by this time have thought me!) in the most unmistakable manner, coming more than once quite within reach. However, she soon gave over these attempts at intimidation, perched beside the percher, and again put something into his maw. This time she did not feed the nestling. As she took her departure, she told the come-outer — or so I fancied — that there was a man under the tree, a pestilent fellow, and it would be well to get a little out of his reach. At all events, she had scarcely disappeared before the youngster was again on the wing. It was wonderful how much at home he seemed, — poising, backing, soaring, and alighting with all the ease and grace of an old hand. One only piece of awkwardness I saw him commit: he dropped upon a branch much too large for his tiny feet, and was manifestly uncomfortable. But he did not stay long, and at his next alighting was well up in the tree, where it was noticeable that he remained ever after.

With so much going on outside, it was hard to remain indoors, and finally I took a chair to the orchard, and gave myself up to watching the drama. The feeding process, though still always by regurgitation, was by this time somewhat different from what it had been when the bills of the young were less fully developed. In my notes of this date I find the following description of it: "Number Two is still in the nest, but uneasy. At 10.25 the mother appeared and fed him.[1] Her beak was thrust into his mouth at right angles, — the change being necessitated, probably, by the greater length of his bill, — and he seemed to be jerking strenuously at it. Then he opened his beak and remained motionless, while the black mandibles of the mother could be seen running down out of sight into his throat."

[1] For convenience, I use the masculine pronoun in speaking of both the young birds; but I knew nothing as to the sex of either of them, though I came finally to believe that one was a male and the other a female.

The other youngster, Number One, as I now called him, stayed in the tree, or at most ventured only into the next one, and was fed at varying intervals, — as often, apparently, as the busy mother could find anything to give him. Would he go back to his cradle for the night? It seemed not improbable, notwithstanding he had shown no sign of such an intention so long as daylight lasted. At 3.50 the next morning, therefore, I stole out to see. No; Number Two was there alone.

At seven o'clock, when I made my second visit, the mother was in the midst of another day's hard work. Twice within five minutes she brought food to the nestling. Once the little fellow — not so very little now — happened to be facing east, while the old bird alighted, as she had invariably done, on the western side. The youngster, instead of facing about, threw back his head and opened his beak. "Look out, there!" exclaimed my fellow-observer; "you 'll break his neck if you feed him in that way." But she did not mind. Young birds' necks are not so easily broken. Within ten minutes of this time she fed Number One, giving him three doses. They were probably small, however (and small wonder), for he begged hard for more, opening his bill with an appealing air. The action in this case was particularly well seen, and the vehement jerking, while the beaks were glued together, seemed almost enough to pull the young fellow's head off. Within another ten minutes the mother was again ministering to Number Two! Poor little widow! Between her incessant labors of this kind and her overwhelming anxiety whenever any strange bird came near, I began to be seriously alarmed for her. As a member of a strictly American family, she was in a fair way, I thought, to be overtaken by the "most American of diseases," — nervous prostration. It tired me to watch her.

With us, and perhaps with her likewise, it was a question whether Number Two would remain in the nest for the day. He grew more and more restless; as my companion — a learned man — expressed it, he began to "ramp round." Once he actually mounted the rim of the nest, a thing which his more precocious brother had never been seen to do, and stretched forward to pick at a neighboring stem. Late that afternoon the mother fed him five times within an hour, instead of once an hour, or thereabouts, as had been her habit three weeks before. She meant to have him in good condition for the coming event; and he, on his part, was active to the same end, — standing upon the wall of the nest again and again, and exercising his wings till they made a cloud about him. A dread of launching away still kept him back, however, and shortly after seven o'clock I found him comfortably disposed for the night. "He is now on his twenty-first day (at least) in the nest. To-morrow will see him go." So end my day's notes.

At 5.45 the next morning he was still there. At 6.20 I absented myself for a few minutes, and on returning was hailed by my neighbor with the news that the nest was empty. Number Two had flown between 6.25 and 6.30, but, unhappily, neither of us was at hand to give him a cheer. I trust that he and his mother were not hurt in their feelings by the oversight. The whole family (minus the father) was still in the apple-tree; the mother full, and more than full, of business, feeding one youngster after the other, as they sat here and there in the upper branches.

Twenty-four hours later, as I stood in the orchard, I heard a hum of wings, and found the mother over my head. Presently she flew into the top of the tree, and the next instant was sitting beside one of the young ones. His hungry mouth was already wide open, but before feeding him she started up

from the twig, and circled about him so closely as almost or quite to touch him with her wings. On completing the circle she dropped upon the perch at his side, but immediately rose again, and again flew round him. It was a beautiful act, — beautiful beyond the power of any words of mine to set forth; an expression of maternal ecstasy, I could not doubt, answering to the rapturous caresses and endearments in which mothers of human infants are so frequently seen indulging. Three days afterward, to my delight, I saw it repeated in every particular, as if to confirm my opinion of its significance. The sight repaid all my watchings thrice over, and even now I feel my heart growing warm at the recollection of it. Strange thoughtlessness, is it not, which allows mothers capable of such passionate devotion, tiny, defenseless things, to be slaughtered by the million for the enhancement of woman's charms!

At this point we suddenly became aware that for at least a day or two the old bird had probably been feeding her offspring in two ways, — sometimes by regurgitation, and sometimes by a simple transfer from beak to beak. The manner of our discovery was somewhat laughable. The mother perched beside one of the young birds, put her bill into his, and then apparently fell off the limb head first. We thought she had not finished, and looked to see her return; but she flew away, and after a while the truth dawned upon us. Thereafter, unless our observation was at fault, she used whichever method happened to suit her convenience. If she found a choice collection of spiders,[1] for instance, she brought them in her throat (as cedar-birds carry cherries), to save trips; if she had only one or two, she retained them between her mandibles. It will be understood, I suppose, that we did not see the food in its passage from one bird to the other, — human eyesight would hardly be equal to work of such nicety; but the two bills were put together so frequently and in so pronounced a manner as to leave us in no practical uncertainty about what was going on. Neither had I any doubt that the change was connected in some way with the increasing age of the fledgelings; yet it is to be said that the two methods continued to be used interchangeably to the end, and on the 28th, when Number Two had been out of the nest for seven days, the mother thrust her bill down his throat and repeated the operation, just as she had done three weeks before.

For at least two days longer, as I believe, the faithful creature continued her loving ministrations, although I failed to detect her in the act. Then, on the 1st of August, as I sat on the piazza, I saw her for the last time. The honeysuckle vine had served her well, and still bore half a dozen scattered blossoms, as if for her especial benefit. She hovered before them, one by one, and in another instant was gone. May the Fates be kind to her, and to her children after her, to the latest generation! Our intercourse had lasted for eight weeks, — wanting one day, — and it was fitting that it should end where it had begun, at the sign of the honeysuckle.

The absence of the father bird for all this time, though I have mentioned it but casually, was of course a subject of continual remark. How was it to be explained? My own opinion is, sorry as I am to have reached it, that such absence or desertion — by whatever name it may be called — is the general habit of the male rubythroat. Upon this point I shall have some things to say in a subsequent paper.

Bradford Torrey.

[1] Mr. E. H. Eames reports (in The Auk, vol. vii. p. 287) that, on dissecting a humming-bird, about two days old, he found sixteen young spiders in its throat, and a pultaceous mass of the same in its stomach.

VARIATIONS ON AN OLD THEME.

I.

Iter Supremum.

Oh, what a night for a soul to go!
The wind a hawk, and the fields in snow;
No screening cover of leaves in the wood,
Nor a star abroad the way to show.

Do they part in peace, — soul with its clay?
Tenant and landlord, what do they say?
Was it sigh of sorrow or of release
I heard just now as the face turned gray?

What if, aghast on the shoreless main
Of Eternity, it sought again
The shelter and rest of the isle of Time,
And knocked at the door of its house of pain!

On the tavern hearth the embers glow,
The laugh is deep, and the flagons low;
But without, the wind and the trackless sky,
And night at the gates where a soul would go.

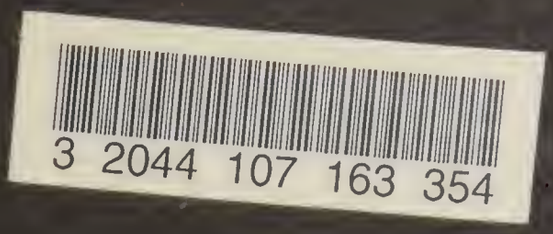
Arthur Sherburne Hardy.

II.

The Old Dwelling.

See how the dwelling trembles to its fall, —
The wondrous house of life, now leased to death
How softly in and out moves the light breath,
And gently in the tender-memoried hall
Speaks the loved owner, soon beyond recall!
In the fast-closing windows glimmereth
A dying glory, as when sunset saith
Good-night, sweet dreams, and faith and hope to all.

Thus, full of enterprise and joyous trust,
Perched on a sill, serene and plumed for flight,
A dove will pause, while ruin round it lies.
So, too, dear soul, although thy house be dust,
Yet thou thyself, now free as morning light,
Canst find another home, 'neath other skies.

Charles Henry Crandall.

Gaylord Bros.
Makers
Syracuse, N. Y.
PAT. JAN. 21, 1908